

FAIRY TALE FOR THE CITY

by Estrella D. Alfon

Walk through the city. Walk like Amado, through the streets of the city, alone. Alone, one man looking up at the big buildings that frown down on the Escolta, on the narrow causeway of the very lonely, crowded with people who walk like Amado, looking up at the frowning big buildings, seeing in the windows repeated patterns of gazeless eyes that look down, yet see nothing of the emptiness that itches in the hearts that beat beneath these lonely breasts. Traffic of automobiles is like waves of water in a swiftly flowing stream, and Amado, a pebble among many pebbles, tumbled along the dry bank, laved by sound and smell and sight of the other people, many of whom walk in the crowd, but walk lonely and alone.

The sound of the city is a shuffle of feet, a staccato of heels, the blare of automobile horns over grate of gear-shift, the sudden flare of sound from automobile horns being punctuated, like echo of big stones dropped into shallow waters. There are voices, but they intrude but lightly into the unretentive mood of the lonely. Hello! -- hi! -- where have you been? A melodious trill to a melody cacophonous but compelling, making shoulders dance and steps go rhythmical in cadence on the sidewalks of the Escolta, from the unblending blending of many songs playing on many phonographs in the record stores that line the causeway, their notes cornucopia-ed into ears of the hurrying people, the meandering streams of sauntering people, and the automobiles going one way, saying honk-honk! Come to me my melancholy baby -- I love to dance with you, -- mambo cha cha cha! Hello! - hi! where are you going? Amado hears it, hears it all without really listening. He feels it like a palpable beat against him, not so much to listen to as to feel: the heat, the beat of music, the staccato of heels and the shuffle of feet, and the blare of horns and the sound of music, the voices saying hello and goodbye and it makes him hurry, hurry until he realizes there is no need to go anywhere fast, so he pauses, and realizes he is so lonely, so alone as he walks through the city.

This is Quiapo now, and Quezon Boulevard is the asphalt he treads on, the church square his area of noise and people, and the rigodons of pedestrian exchange the stream he breasts and becomes part of. So many people, so many cries. Hawkers bent on warding off temporary hungers, shouting *sitcharon-ale? lumpia-lumpia. Balut!* Flowers make a riot of color in the balconies of the patio, and black

net veils hanging from poles add a somber background note. So many people, forming sluggish streams, sluggish streams bearing the rushing griefs of so many people rushing to meet their fates or trying to escape them. Smell of the city, the fragrances and the smells of *estero* and *azucena* flowers, asphalt and carbon acid in the sun, and lead dust from many printing presses crinkling the nostrils and tickling the throat, and the gravy-rancid-oil smell from many restaurants. A little pause brings in another punctuation: the spilled vinegar from the bottle of the *sitcharon* man, bearing with it the pungent smell of crushed red biting peppers, and then the cheap colognes from the bargain counters of the city stores, worn by the sweating women and the pomaded men, serving only to accent the smell of armpits heavy with hair and the pantaloons of women still reeking with love. A baby toddles across the square, a woman runs after it to pick it up, and Amado recognizes also the smell of saliva dried and not completely wiped away. He has tried all the deviations loneliness makes with the devices of the lonely. The rides on the big buses, riding toward he knew not nor cared not what destination, just so it went somewhere. (At the end of the double journey: I have been to nowhere and now am come back from there. And then the question: where now, what nowhere again?) Sitting by the cement walks on the Dewey, watching the poor couples making this their lover's lane, watching holding of hands, and now and then catching eyes held in turgid glance, and looking away. Perhaps someone would approach him, perhaps some as alone as he would talk to him. Wind and sound of sea are appropriate accompaniments to the surge of lonely fevers in a man's heart, and the evening opening of sky is culmination of the gathering dark within him. But faces will approach and he will turn away. A skirt would blow up in the wind and he would turn away from limbs so suddenly exposed, and concentrate again on sound of waves slapping on the cemented artificial shore.

The movie is another device. He would sit in the loge and then move to balcony, and deliberately watch the couples in anonymous embrace in the upper tiers. And then move to orchestra, not watching the picture, because he had seen it, just watching the faces. Sometimes in the dark, after he had seen the picture over, a flame of match or lighter would light up a woman's face, and he would catch his breath, and he would tell himself he had found her, but who? who was it he was looking for? and the confusion, sudden and complete, would possess him to have to tell himself he did not know, and he would stand up, and leave the theater at last, roused out of

the musing that had possessed him like a fairy dream, the instant that flame had lit up dark eyes-dark cheeks-pursed mouth-woman hair.

He had tried them all, all the devices that could possibly slay the tiger that stalked him. He listened to poetry and laughed inside him at the inadequate reading of the young who did not really fathom the unfathomable reaches of loneliness, looked at the whiskey-drinking that was part of the poetry lamentations, himself imbibed them easily, listening to the liquor burst into flowerlets of burst fire inside him, an effect he achieved if he drank the scotch quickly enough, throwing back his head lightly, forcing it down his throat in one gulp, and dropping his lids down on his eyes as he felt the bursting and the flowering inside him.

He went to the boxing games, he went wherever there were people. He watched sometimes when he chanced upon a crowd that watched a movie crew shooting some scenes for a native movie and watched the actors, saved the glances they threw at him and slid away from him, and he would try to recall how he looked that morning: small, slight, thin face and swollen eyes, and a mouth that dropped, so that if he made an effort to draw them up he only succeeded in looking sardonic and unfriendly.

At the boxing games he watched the crowds cheer the protagonists and paid more attention to the fierce visages of hidden frustrations and realizations on the spectators rather than on the fists being exchanged in the ring. He listened to the shouts that egged the fighters on to murder and mayhem, the bloodier the better; wondered to what beds these men would later on go, and how the excitement of the fights would later on find individual fulfillments between groins innocent of the violence that had nurtured midnight love.

All the devices, all. The books he bought and read, that possessed him, so that he would lie reading them after all, reading their themes too ranging for him, too ranting, or too slow. But sometimes he would find something that he liked. Then he would read it and embrace it and devour the story with the avid hunger of the reader who identifies his sorrows and his dreams with the sorrows and the dreams of a hero in a book. But the tale would be finished, and he would dream for a while of some such things happening to him, as had happened in the book, knowing books are

books and life was life, and of course his was not the life books were written about. Poetry satisfied him, because he would return again and again to a beloved phrase, to a joyfully recognized coinage of the ache within him, the point of pain that seized upon a rhythm of words with the kind of intense concentration that a gathering of pus and blood relieves the throbbing of an infected sore.

Device also, device only: entering a whorehouse and buying a woman, choosing her from the docile file that waited in the rococo-decorated anteroom, choosing her for her pout, or a look in the eye that noted fierceness and rebellion, and then watching her undress, and form the abject double angle of commercial love, watching whatever fire there was in the eyes doused, the pout in the mouth saying only Get on with it, and so turning away, turned away by the unloveliness of it, the sharpening of the loneliness within him at rejected love if it had to be this way. Telling the woman to dress, giving her her money gently, smiling at the shrug she made with her shoulders, and thinking with a crazy thought, Perhaps if I asked her: do you ever get lonely? and cowering away from the answer she would make; he could almost hear her sneering *Tche! lonely-lonely, anong lonely ba?* And probably thinking, You poor thing, of course you would be lonely if you can no longer do what you came up here to do. Thinking of course the obvious was what was wrong with him.

He even tried writing, little thoughts and notes to himself, born of the hours he spent, the many hours being alone and talking to himself and asking himself questions that did not form definite inquiries but only formed answers that he knew were merely the dreams that he wished would come true.

He had once been married. He had watched the ultimate and unpreventable dissolution of their union without making any effort to salvage what he knew was better ruined. He used to watch her, the silent one who had been his wife, offering her doors into the void within him, taking her for walks in the city, on the beach, wanting to talk to her, or to have her talk to him and between them, never any sense of having come close or being near. They say women have intuition, and he so wished that she would have some of that. unseeing unthinking feeling for him and talk to him or hold his hand but there was none. Even during the time she gave birth to each of their two children, there had been--what do you call it -- no rapport between them, no path they could travel together. He watched the sweat of labor form droplets on her brow, run down the corners of

her eyes, trickle on to her neck, and as in a dream, he wiped away the moisture, passed a compassionate hand over her eyes grimaced closed in pain, and smile at her when the wailing cry of the infant born sounded an end to her travail.

He knew he had been brutal -- in that unspeaking and unspeakable brutality that is silent, non-violent but implacable. Every little quarrel she had chosen to pick with him he had held against her, in his own private accounting one more of the little things he didn't like in her, one more of the little links in the chain with which he finally enmeshed her, to cast from him, to tell her finally: My life is not materially enriched nor spiritually embroidered because you are in it. And when she made the mistake of saying to him that she felt he could live happier without them, she and the children she had borne him, he pounced upon it, not eagerly, not like a beast that had suddenly come upon a helpless prey but as a thoughtful solon, agreeing that the culprit had transgressed the law, so must punishment be meted to him. But he did not tell which he had implied guilt to, himself or her, or on whom the punishment would be as punishment and not as release.

He settled upon them an adequate pension, so that even against that, they could not say anything that he had not done or had done. An adequate pension for their needs: house, shelter, food, and never once even visited them, nor sent word inquiring how they were, what they were doing, how they were doing the days.

His wife was not virgin when he married her.

But he deflowered another girl of her virginity. She was a girl he had noticed in the street selling cigarets, and through the lonely years had watched her blossom from a flippant little urchin into a bold brash angel of the streets selling her cigarets, having her own circle of friends to whom she made the little bold innuendoes of long acquaintance, daring and very bold, but mostly sallies of the tongue, the mouthed challenges of the unafraid, because unknowing. It was easy for Amado to become close to her.

When he noticed the light fair hair -- her mother must have liked mestizos -- fall on the girlish shoulders with more coquetry than had been the very young urchin's childish wont; when he saw the eyes begin to drop before his own open stare, when she started to offer him his accustomed pack without the flippancies that had

5

been her metier, he started to ask her to sit down with him sometimes to eat. He would watch her gobble dish after dish of ice cream or eat whatever she wished to eat with the special animal hungriness of the young, and smile. Gradually, he taught her how to hold a dainty spoon, a sure fork; how to sit down on a chair; whether her skirts were tight or flowing. Gradually he learned her to soften her voice, not to talk unless spoken to, and how to keep silent without appearing dumb. Then he even sent her to school.

He found her a quick, apt scholar and was gratified to see her get grades that betokened whoever must have been her father was not so brutish, for her intelligence was native and inborn, and learned many things from reading beyond what her sometimes cloddish schoolteachers taught her.

She finished high school and on her graduation day she went to his room. He had never made an effort to learn who her mother was and where she herself lived. She came to him, and he let her.

There was not even any need to say anything to her. She thanked him for the flowers he had a florist deliver to her at the grandstand. She still held the bouquet and she arranged it in a tall glass and set it on the bureau in his room. Then for three days he gave in to her.

She spoke to him. Not passionately but slowly, gently, so that even he could not resist her. She said, I will eventually be asked to give this to some man. I would rather I gave it to you.

She took off her clothing, all the clothing by the way, that he had given her—for one with the young unspoiled figure she had, all she wore was a half slip, a brassiere and a negligible bit of flimsy nylon drawers. Her skin had the perfume of the untrammelled young, her mouth the fresh smell of the clean, the healthy. What ritual they followed was her insistence on being told why he did the things he did to arouse her. He kissed her little breasts and she asked him why her nipples stood up, and why the queerness that possessed her and made her come near a faint.

Kindly, unresistingly, he told her everything she wished to know. Together they voyaged the uncharted scented seas of her own nature and figure. She was an avid and serious pupil. He would allow her to command him: Kiss the back of my neck, and he would

pass his lips over her young nape, the tendrils of her hair getting in the way of his lips. He would brush them back gently, and she would tell him wonderingly, as though she studied a serious subject: Your hands brushing my skin thrill me more than your lips.

They discovered that her knees were completely untouchable, that is, he so much as placed his hands on her kneecaps, her legs drew up and she would shiver with an ague that he would have to pacify, would have to make her forget by leaving her completely alone. Higher up on her thighs, in the inner side, she loved having his fingers pass gently and smoothly, and seriously studious again, she told him how she felt as his fingers went higher and higher, and when finally they reached the joining of her thighs, she told him very softly: Press at me very hard, press me very much.

Thus she knew what part of her must not be touched if she was to maintain her own possession. She did not cry when her maidenhead was broken. She only said, I hurt very much. I feel a lot of pain, and so he left her, not giving in when she insisted that he continue to kiss her, or fondle her, or pass his gentle hands over her back, in the lower broad section of her hips, where she said she felt a heaviness that he assuaged with his hands. He explained that if he continued, she would forget her pain and wish to be hurt, even forgetting her pain. Protesting that she did not really mind he said, No, even pain you must ration, especially this pain, which neither I nor any one again, will ever be able to give to you in like manner, in like forgetting.

She spoke to him things that he did not answer, listening attentively however, and smiling because she was so intense, so young, and so completely honest. He left her during the day, and never asked her what she did, or where she went. But when he came home she would lie there and after sitting with him through the simple supper that he ate, would immediately insist on completing the course of her own seduction.

The second night he taught her how to bite her lips against her own sweet pain, and where to put her mind so that pain would be lost in bliss. His hands as always, were the lovers that aroused that bliss.

On the third night, he taught her what heights of bliss she was entitled to, and how to achieve it, and how to demand it, and how to

regard whoever she was with as servant to her own pleasure, not she to his, and to be the one who did the taking, the tasting, the leading, not the one taken, nor tasted, nor led.

After that third night, he bade her go home, and instructed her that she was not to see him again.

Amado had a mother who lived alone in a house he maintained in comfort for her. Being Amado, he would not live with her, for she was the kind of woman, precisely like his wife, in complete antithesis. She was concerned for him. But where his wife asked no questions, his mother did. Their concern was the same, but their methods of showing it different. Yet he knew it was all for one end: to get nearer to him whom they did not understand, whom they could never understand, whether he answered or didn't the questions they implied or directly threw at him.

Amado's mother was sick. And because she was sick, she called on all the saints. If the state of her health allowed it, she went to the saints, otherwise she invoked them and spent countless hours calling them to her aid. Part of her conversations to Amado, when he made his infrequent visits to her, were the saints and the miracle they could work. Any phenomenon, any manifestations of miracle that the news bruited, she wanted to be part of it, to participate in it. And because she was his mother, he had to take her to these manifestations, although he knew he was being party to a scheme the old woman to work him into the miracle too.

So when the petals fell at Lipa, he took the old woman there. She had just had an attack and her tongue and half her body had a painful paralysis that she strove with these miracles to conquer. The petals at Lipa seemed the answer, and he took her there on pilgrimage. Throughout the journey, he acquiesced, being that kind of a quiet man, to sharing her beads, answering the leads of a rosary she made through the automobile trip. And in Lipa, looking about him, at the many people so bent on believing, he realized where the miracle was: that people so want to believe. That the hunger for believing is greater than even the hunger for meat and bread and love, and greater than any need, the need to have something to rely on, something outside of struggle and everyday living, something outside of everyday circumstance, some absolute value beyond man's own endeavor, beyond disbelief, beyond material wealth and want and effort. He watched the ecstasy and the fervor that transformed

men he knew and had heard about, the ecstasy that possessed the women and the men who knelt at the chapel, who bought the petals that vendors sold and pressed them to fervid lips, who took every blow of wind that shook the images and the vases of flowers on the altar as manifestation of divine presence, and knew he looked at miracle indeed. That there would be this wish for believing in the hearts of men and women driven by many other hungers, that they would take the bother and the dust and the inconvenience of the journey to Lipa because they wished to be part of heaven coming to earth. In this day and in this time.

When the Lipa miracle was declared no miracle, he felt very much for his mother, yet did not quarrel with her when she said, sententiously: I knew I felt better for having gone there. Yet her paralysis did not become better, and she still spoke with a blur to her tongue.

And so we have Amado, the lonely man. There are many like him and this city is filled with them. Who walk the streets of life alone, by perverse choice, not able to help the perversity of loneliness within them, who like the thought of suicide but have no impulse to indulge even that; who have the thought of concupiscence and then trying that, finding no stomach for it. It is a modern disease, and is as felling as tuberculosis or cancer or madness.

He wandered into Baclaran because of his mother. He came back to it ever Wednesday because something of the incongruousness of the whole thing possessed him. This motley crowd, some of whom he recognized. The priests who lectured against sin on the pulpit, saying If you live in a state of sin, it is useless to think you will here find your salvation. Saying, If you are living with any one in sin, coming here will not save you.

Balls! It was a good thing the people did not listen to the priests that railed against them, or else there would be no one dropping coins in the boxes to raise the magnificent church that his friend Cesar was building. Sinners, sinners; all of them, priests, people, builders, stone carriers, carpenters, marble layers. How many of them he recognized, the bosses with their secretaries, the wives with their lovers, the husbands with their friends. The more heavy the sins, the heavier the coin that went into the pouches that were passed around, or into the slotted stands that stood in the paths that every churchgoer traversed going into or out of the church.

It was a good place for the lonely. Baclaran with its songs and its hymns and the people getting accustomed to the rhythm. He always got a good laugh out of the song leader's struggle to get the crowd to get out of their self-imposed lulling meter of the incantations that they sang to the Mother.

One day Amado decided he would write letters to the Virgin. There are letters of supplication and letters of thanks. There are in the church two boxes, one for those who ask, and another for those who have been given.

Amado wrote only letters of thanks. Such was the state of his mind that he thought he would play games with the Virgin's chances of getting to his letters. He wrote three letters. He said, whichever letter gets read -- in Baclaran the priests read only the letters thanking the Virgin for having done the writers a favor-- he would, as it were, go back to the situation in which he would have been supplicating, the predicament, which if solved, he would have made the thanks for.

There were three things in his life: one, the negation he had made of his wife's union to him: by church, and by law; second, the girl whose deflowering he had been part of the ceremony of, and third: his mother's sickening, the attack that had left her stuttering, her hands unsteady and unsure, her tongue no longer tripping on the prayers that she said and the injunctions she made to him.

He wrote three letters therefore. And he said, in the game he was playing, he would play it this way: Whatever letter got read, if read at all, he would make it true, parallel it in life by doing what he would have had the Virgin do for him to have written Her the letter that had been read.

One letter: My wife and I had parted our ways, and I thought we would reach the graves, both of us, forever separated. We had two children, and they were the ones that felt the separation the worst, for it robbed them of me as their father, and the kind of love that makes a complete home. But with your help, Holy Virgin, I was able to win her back, and now we are again living together in happiness and the completeness of a religious, blessed family life.

9

Second letter: I loved a girl but did not know I loved her. I wronged her and then left her, wilfully leaving her to the mercies of the world without my protection, angry over the fact that she had given in to me, thinking that thus would she also give in to every other man. But with your help, Mother Virgin, I realized she loved me, and with constant prayer, I have found her again, and I have vowed that I will protect her against the world and give her my name, and my life.

Third letter: My mother was sick. We have gone to every place that promised cure and health for her. Finally Mother, we made it a practice to come to Baclaran and implore your intercession so that she may be healthy again. Now she has lost her paralysis, and she can talk again, and I think it is because she decided to concentrate her devotions to you.

Every Wednesday, after Amado had written these three letters, which he dropped together, he frequented the devotions and played a game of waiting, wondering if any of the letters would be read, and how he would therefore order his life and live it. For indeed he would do as his letters had thanked the Virgin for Her having done.

If the priest read the first letter, he would seek his wife and he would live with her again and he would be a good father to his children. Perhaps, he said, he might not even be so lonely. Perhaps I can even find something to love and sympathize with in my wife.

If the priest read the second letter, he would look for the girl that he had taught in love. He would ask her no questions: Did you seek love? Did knowing what it was make you wish to have it all your while? Did you seek me? Did you think of me when anyone else tried to teach you what you had learned from me? He would take her to house to live with him, and he would make her a gentle pupil, a willing wife.

But if the third, he would bring his mother to Baclaran every Wednesday, and he would continue the way he had lived, alone, lonely, seeking he knew not what, knowing only that he was alive and wishing that he were dead.

This is a fairy tale. Remember that.

10

One afternoon, at the five-o'clock devotions, when there is the most attendance because people have just come out of their offices, and they hurry to this church that promises them a surcease from the hell they so avidly pursue with their daily weaknesses, Amado -- during that part when the priest reads letters of thanks from devotees -- he heard with a leap of recognition the priest say, We will today read three short letters that prove that the Virgin is everywhere doing Her good toward suffering man, dispensing of Her blessings over those who suffer.

Transfixed, the man Amado heard the priest read his first letter.

Before he could recover, before he could even form how he would live his life from now on, the priest read his second letter. As the priest read it, he felt a hand touch his sleeve, and turning around, he found Maria, the girl of the streets, whom he had taught. The second letter, about Maria, and here was Maria.

Yet the first letter had been read, and so he must go and also seek his wife. And even as he looked at Maria, wondering at her beautiful face, which he had not remembered, for he remembered only the tone of voice she had used to talk to him with those three nights she had been in his house, the priest read his third letter.

With Maria on his arm, he went home to his mother's house, and because this is a true story, I want to tell you he found his mother rejoicing because that afternoon, she had suddenly found the power of clear speech again. And look, look, Amado, I can even walk, the cane I carry is no longer so necessary. I walk, I talk.

I have told you a story. Of Amado, a lonely man. In this city, where there are beggars who stretch their hands out in the street but are richer than those who drop coins into their palms. Where there are massage clinics in a street called Misericordia which employs very young girls, and on this same street there is a shrine kept shining, full of flowers, to house a wooden tapestry-bedecked cross. This is Amado, in this city of Manila, where every Wednesday there are crowds that go to Baclaran.

He wrote the letters on a dare to the Heavens. The letters were all read. I like to think now the Heavens are daring him. He has to keep all the promises he made, if any of the letters were read. But

the three of them were read. How, or why, I like to think of it is part of the fairy tale that is all around us. Fairy tale for now, think of what Amado is going to do.

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